

Jews on the Frontier: An Account of Jewish Pioneers and Settlers in Early America

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No one seriously challenged either the content or point of view of the initial lectures, but the third brought anguished squawks and heart-wrenching groans, for he sunk the barb into the tender flesh and thumbed his scholarly nose at the virginal Clio, muse of history. Professor Frantz—for here he is the professor par excellence—hammers hard, even strikes down, the tradition that the West was that place of places—the lone area where men “stood alone,” battled the environment, and asked for no assistance from anyone, not even the government. Pure, unadulterated individualism, Frantz argues, was a myth-like concept, at least in part. The truth is that “the Federal government” was and is “the major stockholder and underwriter of the American West.” Then he turns the blade in the wound, affirming that even today portions of the West “which hum with economic excitement” still are nourished with federal funds. And that is a quid hard to chew.

The normal review, if written according to the hoyle of corseted critics, should not quote too much, but these lectures are as exceptional as their author. So here goes for one more Frantz flash:

The Westerner can rear up on his hindlegs—r’ar up on his hin’ laigs, to be more nearly precise—and shout that he and he alone wrested that land from the desert or wind or Indian or whatever possessed it. But the truth is that from start to finish he was subsidized from his brogans to his sombrero . . .”

And that’s that. Take it, western historians, or leave it. Smarting as if thrown from a rearing, unbroken stallion with a jar sufficient to split their jeans, cowboys of the profession generally took it. (Even cowgals in this day of equal rights.)

That portion of the public who, despite schooling, are interested in The West and can read will enjoy both the volume’s sturdy scholarship and literary presentation. It is hundred-proof stuff and not Indian whiskey. There are few books which are a joy to review, and this is among them.

—Philip D. Jordan
Burlington

Jews on the Frontier: An Account of Jewish Pioneers and Settlers in Early America, by Rabbi I. Harold Sharfman. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1977. pp. ix, 337. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$10.95.

Rabbi I. Harold Sharfman has succeeded in producing an anecdotal and rather affectionate chronicle of the movement westward of Jewish pioneers and settlers during the early days of the nation’s history, from the French and Indian Wars to the Alamo. But the book’s success, unfortunately, also proves to be the source of its ultimate failure: these often charming tales offer only a glimmer of insight into the larger question of the historical role of the Jew in American life.

Most histories of Jews in America focus primarily on the immigrant popu-

lations of the East coast or the South. Rabbi Sharfman, however, presents a somewhat informal cavalcade of roughhewn individualists—frontiersmen, traders, explorers, and military leaders—who struck out for the West, either alone or with their families. It is in this shift of emphasis, from the urban metropolis to the unsettled frontier, that the author makes his most significant contribution. Sharfman has taken a large step toward debunking the commonly held myth that Jews tended to remain only in major population centers and did not, for various reasons, follow the advice of newspaper publisher Horace Greeley to “Go west, young man, go west!” He has done much to restore many adventurers to their Jewish origins and identities.

This certainly must have been a difficult task. Jews on the frontier often intermarried (sometimes with Indians), changed their surnames, and largely disappeared as Jews who practiced the faith known to their ancestors. The remoteness of the frontier made for an extremely rugged lifestyle. The traditional rituals were troublesome, if not impossible, to maintain. Men greatly outnumbered women and frequently, upon intermarriage to gentiles, Jews would simply become absorbed into the general population. Sometimes they were later to resurface; but more often they did not. As the eminent historian Ray Allen Billington notes in his foreward to *Jews on the Frontier*: “The mere fact that most of his characters were relatively obscure forced Rabbi Sharfman into prodigious efforts to reveal their life stories. He has not only located tidbits of material in hundreds of local journals and other printed sources, but has explored every important archive, investigated dozens of obscure depositories, and searched the attics and basements of synagogues and county court houses for fragments of information. . . . [O]nly a thoroughly dedicated scholar would have invested the years of effort that make such a book possible.”

Some of the heroes of Rabbi Sharfman's book are already quite well known. These include the renowned colonial traders Joseph Simon and Levy Andrew Levy, who helped shape Indian policy and open the West to commerce; Henry Castro, who colonized much of Texas; and Jacob Hirschorn, one of the heroes of the Mexican War. But others had to be rescued from obscurity or are first revealed to be of Jewish origin. The most prominent of these figures is Jean Laffite, the fiery pirate whose buccaneers helped Jackson's forces defeat the British at the Battle of New Orleans. Laffite was a Marrano, a Christianized Jew whose family escaped from Spain during the Inquisition.

At its best, *Jews on the Frontier* reads like a fascinating detective adventure. Passages are written with zest, gusto, and occasional traces of poignant humor. Sharfman brings into our consciousness the careers and daring exploits of courageous men and women. His book is a social document of some worth; a vivid description of an almost extinct segment of Jewish society.

Unfortunately, as has previously been mentioned, this work also has more than its share of flaws, which do much to negate Sharfman's accomplishment. At their worst, the stories are presented in a rambling, convoluted, and disjointed manner. At times the reader feels the author must have

patched together a series of tales from his notes, adding whatever transitional sentences were deemed necessary. Also, and this is a more basic and significant problem, many of the stories are frosted with conversations between the actors, including detailed reports of their emotions. Such superfluous icing on the cake often leaves the reader not knowing where the historical reality concludes and the author's imagination commences.

In the final analysis, *Jews on the Frontier* presents a compassionate look at a fascinating group of people whose story deserves to be told. It is enjoyable to read, and will probably be found useful by those with an interest in Jewish studies. But the book is also little more than a collection of entertaining anecdotes, and this does not necessarily make for good history. It does not tell us as much as we would like to know about the "underlying causes." And Sharfman's embellishments leave us with confusion as well as insight about the true nature of the Jewish experience on the American frontier.

—Jerold A. Rosen
Los Angeles, California

Custer in Texas, by John M. Carroll. New York: Sol Lewis/Liveright, 1975. pp. xx, 288. Illustrations, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$15.00.

Hell hath no fury like an historian scooped. While researching the Samuel Kirkwood papers in Des Moines, I discovered numerous letters protesting the treatment of the First Iowa Cavalry at the hands of the commanding officer of the U.S. Cavalry in Texas in 1865-66, one George Armstrong Custer. Further digging revealed innumerable memorials to Iowa officials—including Adjutant General Baker, Governor Stone, and the legislature, itself—petitioning for redress for the "cruel and barbarous" manner in which the "despot" Custer treated the proud Iowa volunteers. Then I belatedly discovered John M. Carroll's *Custer in Texas*. The story had already been told. Or had it?

The story, itself, is a simple one. In the summer of 1865 the First Iowa Cavalry and several other state cavalry regiments were assigned to Alexandria, Louisiana, Department of the Gulf, under the direct command of Major-General Custer. With him they marched to Hempstead, Texas, and then to Austin, where they were finally mustered out in February 1866. During that period they complained continually about marching conditions, the lack of adequate food and medical supplies, and the ruthless manner in which their commanding general administered discipline. Although much of this was no more than the usual soldier complaints against army life, accentuated by the understandable desire to return home, there was a particular focus to the unrest. Special Order No. 2, issued by General Custer in Alexandria, demanded summary punishment by the lash and/or head shaving, *without access to trial by court martial*, of anyone caught (accused) of foraging

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